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The code of loyalty, personal or impersonal, is implicitly and potentially a means to a end. It is the intent of cooperation. Why? Because of individualism. The "waiting" of the retainers is simply an expression of the priority of the individual over the group. Wiglaf seems dimly to see the dilemma, the glory and the curse of individualism. The retainers were not legally capable or not coming to Beowulf's aid; they did only what they were told to do. Yet Wiglaf's denunciation and his evocation of the loyalty code are right, for the saving of their society requires the cooperative effort that the code contemplates. He also sees the limitations of individual heroism. Beowulf, the greatest of heroes, is loved and revered by his nephew, but the heroic solution is not always the best solution. It is not Beowulf's pride that brings about the ultimate catastrophe, but precisely his heroism. He is not a victim of ego inflation; he simply cannot see other alternatives to his own way. He is a victim of the heroic milieu; he is molded gloriously and inflexibly by his world.

Grendel's Mother and the Women of *Beowulf*

Jane Chance

The role of the women in *Beowulf* has long been debated; are they primarily active participants in the life of the hall or passive victims of the behavior of the men? Jane Chance, a professor of English at Rice University, argues that the character of Grendel's mother provides the best focus for assessing the representations of women in the poem. Chance contends that the human women are primarily passive sufferers of male violence, but that Grendel's mother provides an alternative view of the female as actively seeking to rectify or revenge the wrongs she has suffered.

The episode in *Beowulf* involving Grendel's mother has been viewed as largely extraneous, a blot upon the thematic and structural unity of the poem. If the poem is regarded as two-part in structure, balancing contrasts between the hero's youth and old age, his rise as a retainer and his fall as a king, his battles with the Grendel family and his battle with the dragon, then her episode (which includes Hrothgar's sermon and Hygelac's welcoming court celebration with its recapitulation of earlier events) lengthens the first "half" focusing on his youth to two-thirds of the poem (lines 1-2199). If the poem is regarded as three-part in structure, with each part centering on one of the three monsters or the three fights, then the brevity of her episode again mars the structural balance: . . . Even if her episode is lengthened to a thousand lines so as to include Hrothgar's sermon and Hygelac's court celebration, still Grendel's mother hardly dominates these events literally or symbolically as do Grendel and the dragon the events in their sections.

But her battle with Beowulf (and this middle section of the poem) is more than merely a "transition between two

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great crises," even though it is "linked with both the Grendel fight and the Dragon fight" [Adrien Bonjour]. The key to her significance may indeed derive from her links with the other two monsters. . . .

THE INVERSION OF FEMININE IDEALS

Like these monsters, Grendel's mother is also described in human and social terms. She is specifically called a "monstrous woman" and a "lady monster-woman." . . . It seems clear from these epithets that Grendel's mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother and queen, or lady. She has the form of a woman and is weaker than a man and more cowardly, for she flees in fear for her life when discovered in Heorot. But unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles. *Maxims I* testifies that, "Battle, war, must develop in the man, and the woman must flourish beloved among her people, must be light-hearted."

Because the poet wishes to stress this specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both monstrous and masculine he labels her domain a "battle-hall." . . .

The poet constantly contrasts the unnatural behavior of Grendel's dam with that of the feminine ideal by presenting human examples as foils in each of the two parts. We turn first to an examination of the female ideal in *Beowulf*, then to a detailed analysis of the episode involving Grendel's mother and its two parts, and finally to some conclusions regarding the structural unity of the entire poem.

THE WOMAN AS PEACE-WEAVER

The role of woman in *Beowulf* primarily depends upon "peace-making," either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as a cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall. Wealhtheow becomes a peace-pledge to unite the Danes and Helmings; Hildeburh similarly unites the Danes and Frisians through her marriage; and Freawaru at least intends to pledge peace between the Danes and Heathobards. Such a role is predicated upon the woman's ability to bear children, to create blood ties, bonds to weave a "peace kinship."

In addition, woman functions domestically within the nation as a cup-passer during hall festivities of peace and joy after battle or contest. The mead-sharing ritual and the cup-passer herself come to symbolize peace-weaving and peace because they

strengthen the societal and familial bonds between lord and retainers. First, the literal action of the peace-weaver as she passes the cup from warrior to warrior weaves an invisible web of peace: the order in which each man is served, according to his social position, reveals each man's dependence upon and responsibility toward another. For example, after Wealhtheow gives the cup to Hrothgar she bids him to be joyful at drinking as well as loving to his people. Then she offers it to the old retainers, then to the young retainers, and finally to the guest Beowulf. Second, her peace-weaving also takes a verbal form: her speeches accompanying the mead-sharing stress the peace and joy contingent upon the fulfillment of each man's duty to his nation. At the joyous celebration after Grendel's defeat Wealhtheow concludes her speeches with a tribute to the harmony of the present moment by reminding her tribe of its cause, that is, adherence to the *comitatus* ethic. Each man remains true to the other, each is loyal to the king, the nation is ready and alert, the drinking warriors attend to the ale-dispenser herself. . . .

Third, the peace-weaver herself emblemizes peace, for she appears in the poem with her mead-vessel only after a contest has been concluded. Thus Wealhtheow enters the hall only after the contest between Unferth and Beowulf; she does not appear again until after Beowulf has overcome Grendel, when the more elaborate feasting invites the peace-making speeches mentioned above.

Most of the other female characters figure as well in this middle section so that the female monster's adventures are framed by descriptions of other women for ironic contrast. . . .

PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE, NOT REVENGE

In the first part of the female monster's section, the idea is stressed that a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son. The story of the mother Hildeburh is recited by the scop [singer] early on the evening Grendel's mother will visit Heorot. The lay ends at line 1159; Grendel's mother enters the poem a mere hundred lines later when she attacks the Danish hall, as the Frisian contingent attacked the hall lodging Hildeburh's Danish brother in the *Finnsburh Fragment*. The *Beowulf* poet alters the focus of the fragment: he stresses the consequences of the surprise attack rather than the attack itself in order to reveal Hildeburh's maternal reactions to them.

Hildeburh is "unjustly" deprived of her Danish brother and Finnish son, but all she does, this "sad woman," is to mourn her loss with dirges and stoically place her son on the pyre. In fact, she can do nothing, caught in the very web she has woven as peace-pledge: her husband's men have killed her brother, her brother's men have killed her son. Later the Danish Hengest will avenge the feud with her husband Finn, whether she approves or not, by overwhelming the Frisians and returning Hildeburh to her original tribe. The point remains: the peace-pledge must accept a passive role precisely because the ties she knots bind *her*—she is the knot, the pledge of peace. Her fate interlaces with that of her husband and brothers through her role as a mother bearing a son: thus Hildeburh appropriately mourns the loss of her symbolic tie at the pyre, the failure of her self as peace-pledge, the loss of her identity. Like Hildeburh Grendel's dam will also lose her identity as mother, never having had an identity as peace-pledge to lose. . . .

Grendel's mother intent on avenging the loss of her son in the present attacks Heorot, her masculine aggression contrasting with the feminine passivity of both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow. Indeed, she resembles a grieving human mother: like Hildeburh she is guiltless and "gloomy-minded"; her journey to Heorot must be sorrowful for she "remembered her misery." . . .

Her attempts to avenge her son's death could be justified if she were human and male, for no *wergild* [compensation] has been offered to her by the homicide Beowulf. The role of the masculine avenger is emphasized throughout the passage in defining her motivation to attack: she performs the role of avenger "to avenge the death of her son." Whatever her maternal feelings, she actually fulfills the duty of the kinsman. Unlike Hildeburh, she cannot wait for a Hengest to resolve the feud in some way; unlike Freawaru, she cannot act as a peace-pledge to settle the feud. Tribeless, now kinless, forced to rely on her own might, she seizes and kills Æschere, Hrothgar's most beloved retainer, in an appropriate retribution for the loss of her own most beloved "retainer" and "lord"—her son. . . .

For a mother to "avenge" her son as if she were a retainer, he were her lord, and avenging more important than peace-making, is monstrous. . . .

This idea [that peace-weaving must ultimately fail] is implied in Hrothgar's sermon (1700–84), like the court celebration of Hygelac a part of the middle section belonging to Grendel's

mother but apparently unrelated to it. In it Hrothgar describes three Christian vices in distinctly Germanic terms. Impelled by envy like Grendel, Heremod kills his "table-companions." Next the wealthy hall-ruler in his pride is attacked by the Adversary while his guardian conscience sleeps within the hall of his soul. So the monster that specifically epitomizes pride in *Beowulf*, as in Genesis, is female—Grendel's mother. . . .

Grendel's mother substitutes war-making for the peace-weaving of the queen out of a kind of selfish pride—if she were capable of recognizing it as such. Finally, this same hall ruler "covets angry-minded" the ornamented treasures God has previously given him by refusing to dispense any to his warriors. So the mock gold-king dragon avariciously [greedily] guards his treasure. Although the poet portrays the monsters as antitypes of Germanic ideals, his integument [covering] conceals a Christian idea. The city of man, whether located in a Germanic or Christian society, is always threatened by sin and failure.

Such sin alienates Christian man from self, neighbor, and God; it alienates Germanic man primarily from other men. Note that although in *Beowulf* each of the three monsters is described as guarding or possessing a hall, whether Heorot, a watery cavern, or a barrow, each remains isolated from humanity (and from each other—Grendel and his mother live together, but they never appear together in the poem until he is dead). Ideally when the retainer, the queen, and the gold-lord cooperate they constitute a viable nucleus of Germanic society: a retainer must have a gold-lord from whom to receive gold for his loyalty in battle; the peace-weaver must have a "loom"—the band of retainers and their lord, or two nations—upon which to weave peace.

Despite the poet's realization that these roles cannot be fulfilled in this world, this Germanic ideal provides structural and thematic unity for *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother does occupy a transitional position in the poem: as a "retainer" attacking Heorot she resembles Grendel, but as an "attacked ruler" of her own "hall" she resembles the dragon. As a monstrous mother and queen she perverts a role more important socially and symbolically than that of Grendel. . . .

The structural position of her episode in the poem, like woman's position as cup-passer among members of the nation, or as a peace-pledge between two nations, is similarly medial and transitional, but successfully so.